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HELL



By Very Rev. Francis J. Ripley, C.M.S.

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Questions and Answers

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Questions and Answers

Do Roman Catholics believe in the mercy of God?

Yes. We believe most firmly all that Scripture tells us about God's kindness towards man in his sorrows and afflictions and especially towards repentant sinners. With the Jews we pray to God as "merciful and gracious, patient and of much compassion, and true" (Ex. 34:6). We believe that God's mercy is immeasurably great (Ps. 50 : 3), all-embracing (Ps. 144 : 9); inexhaustible (Ps. 29 : 6); freely given (Ex. 33 : 19) and endless. One of the outstanding features of the life of Christ, who was God, was His mercy. Towards repentant sinners, mourners, the sick, the suffering and the needy He was unfailingly kind, sympathetic and compassionate.

Yet do you not believe that this merciful God condemns sinners to an endless hell?

That is not strictly speaking correct. What we do believe is that those who die in a state of mortal sin of which they have not repented are separated from God forever in hell.

What do you mean by mortal sin?

All sin is the breaking of the moral law. For a sin to be mortal certain conditions must be fulfilled. They are that the transgression must be (1) in a serious matter; (2) committed with the knowledge that what we do is seriously wrong and (3) with full deliberation and consent on the part of the will. If one or more of these three conditions is missing there is no mortal sin. You cannot commit mortal sin by accident; therefore, you cannot go to hell by accident.

Does God give every man enough help to save his soul?

Yes. "God our Saviour . . . . will have all men to be saved" (1 Tim. 2 : 4). "The Lord . . . . dealeth patiently for your sake, not willing that any should perish, but that all should return to penance" (2 Pet. 3 : 9). He does not entirely withdraw his grace even from blinded and hardened sinners. The Bible is

full of admonitions to sinners to repent; these presuppose that repentance is always possible with the help of God's grace: "I desire not the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live" (Ezech. 33 : 11).

What does "hell" mean?

The place and state in which the devils and such human beings as die in enmity with God suffer torment for ever.

Is hell a place?

Yes; that has always been taken for granted by the Church though it has never been defined as of faith. It is the most natural inference from the texts of Scripture.

Where is hell?

We do not know; God has never revealed that to us.

Is a Catholic bound to believe in hell?

Yes. The Athanasian Creed (5th or 6th century) professes that "it is necessary for salvation to believe that those who have done evil will go into everlasting fire. This is the Catholic faith. Everyone must believe it, firmly and steadfastly; otherwise, he cannot be saved." The fourth Lateran Council, 1215, states: "Christ will reward all according to their works . . . . the wicked will receive a perpetual punishment with the devil." Pope Innocent IV stated in 1254: "If anyone dies unrepentant in the state of mortal sin he will undoubtedly be tormented for ever in the fires of an everlasting hell." From the second Council of Lyons in 1274 we have: "The souls of those who die in mortal sin go down to hell." Pope Benedict XII declared in 1336: "According to God's general ordinance, the souls of those who die in personal grievous sin descend immediately into hell, where they will be tormented by the pains of hell." Earlier Pope Innocent III had written to the Archbishop of Arles in 1301: "The punishment for original sin is the loss of the vision of God; but the punishment for actual sin is the torment of an everlasting hell."

Did Jesus Christ say we must believe in hell?

Yes, clearly and many times: "Depart from me, you cursed, into everlasting fire, which was prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matt. 25:41). "Depart from me all ye workers of

iniquity. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you shall see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets, in the Kingdom of God; and you yourselves thrust out" (Luke 13:27-28). "It is better for thee to go into life maimed or lame than, having two hands or two feet, to be cast into everlasting fire" (Matt. 18 : 8). "Fear him that can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10 : 28). Many other texts could be quoted.

Is it not strange that St Paul never mentions hell?

He does. He says the fate of the unredeemed is to be "death" (Rom. 6 : 21-23). The encounter with God's wrath will bring "tribulation and anguish" (Rom 2 : 5,9). "Who shall suffer eternal punishment in destruction" (2 Thess. 1 : 9). "The unjust shall not possess the Kingdom of God" (1 Cor. 6 : 9; Gal. 5 : 19-21).

Will hell last for ever?

Yes; read again the texts already quoted. Jesus Christ says also: "The worm dieth not, and the fire is not extinguished" (Mark 9 : 47). St Jude refers to: "Those to whom the storm of darkness is reserved for ever" (Jude 13). St John says: "The smoke of their torments shall ascend up for ever and ever" (Apoc. 14 : 11).

May not the word translated as "eternal", "everlasting" and "for ever" have other meanings, for example, "age long"?

Yes, but Jesus Christ contrasts eternal punishment with eternal life. Nobody doubts that heaven is going to be eternal; why then doubt it about hell? Christ says the fire will never be extinguished; the worm will never die. He said it would have been better if Judas had not been born. Nothing He said suggests that we should qualify His references to eternal fire.

Did not St Peter say (Acts 3 : 21) that all things would be restored?

Yes; but before the Judgment and not after it. He was referring to what would happen on earth, not to hell.

Does not the word translated as "hell" mean simply the grave?

Sometimes yes, but not in the texts we have quoted to prove the existence of hell.

Does not St John's Gospel contradict the others about hell?

No. St John always pictured men's future destiny in terms of eternal life or eternal loss (John 3 : 3,15; 6 : 40,55,59; 12 : 25,48,50; and 20 : 31).

Did not early Christian writers believe that hell would end?

Yes, a few did following Origen (185-255). But Origen was condemned at a Synod of Constantinople in 553. Apart from these few the Fathers unanimously believed that the eternity of hell is clearly taught in the New Testament.

What are the pains of hell like?

They are two-fold, the pain of loss and the pain of sense.

What is the pain of loss?

It means being deprived of the direct vision of God. It is the most bitter torment of hell.

Is not the pain of loss a merely negative thing; what one has not enjoyed one will not miss?

That is not so. The pain of loss is very positive. Anguish is caused by the frustration and emptiness of souls that were created to enjoy the direct vision of God, by their knowing that the God on whom they depend is an enemy for ever, by their remorse at having themselves forfeited the greatest blessings, by their inability to satisfy nature's innate craving for happiness, by their consciousness that God is infinitely happy and that they are powerless against Him.

What is the pain of sense?

It includes all the other torments of hell except the pain of loss.

Until the final resurrection only souls are in hell; but souls have no senses; so how can they suffer the pain of sense?

The term "pain of sense" does not mean merely punishment inflicted on the bodily senses; it is certain that the souls in hell suffer from real, created, physical fire.

Did not some of the Fathers of the Church regard this fire as only figurative?

Yes, only a few, among them Origen and St Ambrose, but tradition is overwhelmingly against them. The New Testament describes the punishment of hell as fire no less than thirty times. St Peter and St Jude compare it with the fire of Sodom, which was very real. No Catholic could deny that the fire of hell is real without sinning seriously against faith; it would not however be formal heresy because it is not a defined dogma.

What is the main difference between the pain of loss and the pain of sense?

The former is the absence of something, the latter the presence of something.

You say the fire in hell is real, created and physical. Please explain this further.

Christ, God Himself, used the word 'fire' to describe the torment of hell. Fire, then, must be that element best known to us which produces results most like the fire of hell. There are obvious differences. The fire we know depends on combustion; the fire of hell does not depend on being constantly fed with fuel. It depends solely on God's will. God showed Moses a bush which, although it was in flames, was not consumed. Hell fire does not give light, for hell is described as darkness. It is capable of afflicting spirits, wherever they are and tormenting the damned unequally according to their sins.

Is it possible to explain fully the nature of hell fire?

No, because we have to use the ideas and words with which we are familiar here to describe a world of which we have no experience. Christ used the word 'fire'; therefore we know it is the nearest analogy. Sentimentality has pushed modern discussion of hell fire to such lengths of aversion as to make it almost non-existent. But so ancient and so universal is the teaching of the theologians that it would be extremely temerarious to deny its reality. There is real fire in hell by which the devils and souls of the damned are punished until men's bodies finally rise. Then the bodies of the damned also suffer punishment by fire. This fire works supernaturally. As an instrument of God's justice its effects are entirely beyond the natural powers of fire. We must not think of burning devils or separated souls. We just do not know how fire punishes them. St Thomas Aquinas conjectured that the action of hell fire was mainly one of hemming in and limiting the activities of the proudest creatures of the universe.

Is not the word "fire" just a metaphor for the pain of loss?

No; it is a pain inflicted by an external agent by God's will.

Did God create this fire specially for hell?

We do not know. It is not necessary that He should have done so.

If God exists He is love; hell spells hatred: are not these two contradictory?

Yes, God is love. He loves all men. In His love He gave us freedom to reject Him. If we do that what can we expect but the opposite of love? God damns only those who deliberately choose hatred and evil instead of love and goodness.

Yet this loving God could prevent our choosing hatred and evil; if He is all-powerful as well as all-loving should He not do that?

Yes, God is all-powerful; He is all-wise, too. He chose to make us free. He could have done otherwise. Our freedom does not limit Him in any way. God is not beaten by the man who rejects Him. It is not for the creature to say that the Creator should have done this or should have done that.

How can an infinitely good God insist on keeping His creatures imprisoned in an abyss of fire forever? Is He never satisfied? Would it not be better to annihilate them?

It would not. If you demand the annihilation of sinners you demand that God reverse His plans; you want Him to stultify His own work and admit that He is powerless.

God is merciful; why does He not forgive the devils and the damned?

Because they do not want mercy; they want hell because they have decided they do not want God. There is no alternative. When God offered them mercy they rejected it and chose evil instead.

Surely after the experience of hell sinners would repent and want God?

They would not; they have chosen evil deliberately. What you suggest is hardly true repentance, which is a loving choice of God, not something which is forced on one by the experience of pain.

Does not the Bible say (Heb. 2 : 14) that the devil will be destroyed?

The Bible says no such thing. Your text teaches that the Redeemer will destroy Satan's power over the redeemed, not Satan himself.

Is not all this talk about hell quite unreasonable?

It is not. Reasonable men accept what God tells them. There are few things He has told them as clearly as the existence and eternity of hell.

How could a parent be happy knowing his child is in hell?

Love that is natural during life becomes supernatural after death. Supernatural love of God is incompatible with love of evil. The child in hell has freely chosen evil. The parent sees him now in the light of the justice of God.

What about all the good that the damned must have done in their lives along with the evil?

They themselves deliberately cancelled it out; they turned against it. That is what mortal sin is—the free, deliberate choice of grave evil in preference to God.

If God's love for men is so great that He died for them, surely it is great enough to forgive always?

Precisely; God's love has no limits. It is Himself. But He cannot forgive those who will not be forgiven. A grave sinner is one who rejects God's forgiveness. His love of goodness is without limit; His hatred of evil is therefore in due proportion. Sin is evil; God only sends men to hell when they choose to go there by freely rejecting His love.

Is it just that a momentary sin should be punished timelessly?

Quite just; the time it takes to do grave wrong is beside the point. What matters is the wrong done, that it is gravely evil and done freely.

Surely there comes a time when enough satisfaction has been paid?

No; not if the sin is mortal. It is a complete rejection of infinite good. If a sinner knew that after a time God was bound to remove him from torment he would be in a position to threaten God, saying, as it were, "God, do your worst; I may go to hell

for a million years but you are bound to have me in the end for a timeless eternity." To think of hell in relation to time is quite wrong. There is no time in hell.

Surely infinite mercy cannot allow such an unmerciful thing as hell?

On the contrary, hell is most merciful. Even though it exists God need not have revealed it to us. Knowledge of hell has prevented very many sins and their dreadful consequences for individuals and human society.

How can Christ be so cruel as to damn souls for ever? He was always so gentle to sinners.

Precisely; He was gentle to repentant sinners. He still is. Yet this same gentle Christ said such very strong things about hell. We should take all the more notice of them therefore. Justice and reasonable punishment are not cruelty. Hell is just and reasonable. God has made serious laws for our well-being; He has told us the penalty for breaking them. He helps us by His grace at every moment to keep them. Who is to blame if we disobey?

What percentage of men goes to hell?

We do not know; God has never told us.

Is Judas in hell?

It seems that he is because Christ said of him: "Better for him that he had never been born"; but we do not know for certain.

Is Adam in hell?

It seems not; almost certainly he is in heaven. Scripture says: "God brought him out of his sin" (Wis. 10 : 2). The Greek Church keeps Adam's feast.

God is everywhere; if hell exists God must be in hell: but that is impossible. So tell me do you still believe in hell?

I do; God is present in hell as He is present everywhere else by His being, His knowledge and His power.

If God is in hell, it ceases to be hell; His presence must aleviate the pains of the damned; therefore is not all you have been saying so far contradicted?

No; God's presence in hell is merely physical. The fact that two people are in the same room does not mean that they have anything in common.

Do you believe that a good and loving father wishes to torment his children for ever?

I do not. If God wanted to do that He would not have become man to save us from hell. A child can turn against its father; the damned in hell have turned against God. They have refused His mercy.

Is not that mercy without limit? Could not God have prevented souls refusing it? Why does He not do so?

Yes, God's mercy is without limit. Absolutely speaking God could force His creatures to accept His mercy. But in order to do that He would have to take away their free will. That would mean, at the behest of evil, repudiating His own plan for mankind. He would be subjecting Himself to evil. Wilful sinners would triumph in the end. It is not mercy to allow men to think that evil will not have due retribution.

Does not the doctrine of hell make God like the man who sends a shipload of people out to sea knowing that some of them will certaintly be lost?

No; your comparison is faulty. You should add that the owner of the ship saw that it was seaworthy, made the first journey himself, put on board a captain who could not make a mistake, gave everybody strict instructions as to what to do and promised to be with them at all times to help them do it, and kept his promise.

You will admit that God is not bound to create certain souls; if He knew they would be damned why does He create them?

We have already proved that hell is a fact. It is part of the plan of an infinitely wise, good and powerful God. Therefore it must be the best for His purposes. Who are we to dictate to Him? If we find it hard to reconcile certain facts we must blame our limited knowledge not God's infinite wisdom. God saw the whole plan. He permits evil only for the sake of good.

But how can there be good in creating somebody who is going to be damned?

The very fact of his damnation means that he is a terrible wit-

ness of the justice of God. Suppose God refrained from creating those He knew would reject all He has done to help them save their souls, He would be subjecting Himself to evil. Moreover, He would also be preventing the existence of their descendants, amongst whom might be great saints. Are we to presume that all the ancestors of all the saints saved their souls? You are asking God to regulate His plans according to what He foresees would be Satan's success. That is surely unreasonable.

Do all mortal sins deserve hell?

Yes; they are essentially the complete turning away from goodness and the acceptance of evil. Anything less than that is not mortal sin.

Is it just that a man who dies without repenting after committing his first mortal sin should go to hell for ever whereas another person escapes hell by a death-bed repentance after a life of serious sin?

It is just. God is justice. He cannot be unjust. Remember that nobody goes to hell unless he deliberately and knowingly chooses grave evil in preference to God; he thereby rejects infinite love. Both the persons in your question were offered enough grace to save their souls; one rejected it, the other accepted it. Nobody but the sinner is to blame if he dies in mortal sin. God has surely given us enough warnings.

Do you not find it hard to believe that just one mortal sin means damnation for ever?

No; because I am taught it by an infallible Church. Apart from that, I can see that this life is our time of trial. We come to the end of it having chosen deliberately good or evil. It seems perfectly reasonable that if we have made such a choice we should abide by it. If a man rejects God he chooses separation from God, and that is the essence of hell.

Must there always be freedom, deliberation and enough knowledge to commit the kind of sin for which one can go to hell?

Yes—full deliberation and sufficient knowledge. If, for example, an insane man kills another, he would not go to hell for it.

Do you deny that the R.C. religon is based largely on fear?

Yes, I do. It is based on faith, hope and charity; nevertheless the Bible insists that "The fear of God is all wisdom" (Ecclus. 19 : 18). The fear of God is the fear of sons; it is a dread of offending the God who is worthy of all love, a fear of being separated from Him by sin.

Are not R.C. churches filled many times every Sunday because the priests are careful to "keep the hell-fires burning"?

I hope not. I hope our people attend Mass because they love the Mass. We have an old saying: "It is the Mass that matters." At least they go from a sense of duty. But I would not blame unduly those who go to church because of a wholesome fear of hell. It is better to go for that motive than not to go at all. It ill becomes those who never go to church to blame those who do.

Would not R.C. priests be wiser to follow the example of Christ and lead men by love rather than force them by the fear of hell?

Every priest is urged to follow Christ's example. Every priest indeed believes that in virtue of his mission and his orders he is another Christ. But in the Sermon on the Mount Christ mentioned hell half a dozen times. What Christ taught about hell the Church teaches about hell and only that. The Church does not add to the teaching of Christ nor take away from it. It is my experience that sermons on hell are quite rare in our churches, perhaps too infrequent.

Would not the R.C. Church be more popular and make more converts by teaching the love of God more than the fear of hell?

To say yes or no to that would be pointless. For twenty centuries the R.C. Church has taught just what her Founder Christ taught. She does not court popularity in any way opposed to Christ's teaching. She teaches what He taught about love—"It is the first and the greatest Commandment"—and about hell. Christ, the greatest of lovers, emphasised the fact of hell firmly and frequently. Do you suggest that His Church ought to do less? The Catholic Church tries to love good and hate evil as God does. His love of good is infinite; so is His hatred of evil. They must be. God loves all men with infinite love: He wills all men to be saved. But some men return His love

unwanted. It is only through His love that they exist at all. God is love and goodness; He cares infinitely for all His creatures longing for each one to achieve its purpose and hating proportionately all that opposes that purpose. The due reward of good is heaven; the due reward of evil is hell. God's infinite love of good postulates infinite hatred of evil. Heaven is the counterpart in eternity of good in time; hell is the counterpart in eternity of evil in time.

Could not the R.C. Church's insistence on hell be due to wrong translation of the Bible?

No. The word hell is not a faulty translation. Modern usage restricts it to the meaning we have given it in these pages.

Is not death sufficient punishment for sin as the Bible says "the wages of sin is death"?

Christ did not think so. He revealed many things about the lot of the damned. "Death", in your quotation, is better understood as referring to spiritual death.

Do all the damned suffer equally?

No. "God will render to every man according to his works" (Matt. 16 : 27).

May I be a Catholic if I believe in hell but a hell that will not last for ever?

No, you may not. The Church has defined, as we have seen, that hell is eternal. We can never understand the eternity of hell but we accept it humbly on God's authority. There can be no conflict between hell, its nature or its eternity and the infinite attributes of God.

Would it not be more sensible to believe that instead of insisting on enternity of punishment for sinners God is satisfied with a token satisfaction?

You are mixed up. Only those souls go to hell who die unrepentant, having rejected the grace of repentance. God has given them sufficient grace to save their souls; maybe it was the grace of repentance; always it was the grace to overcome temptation

to sin: "God is faithful and will not suffer you to be tempted beyond that which you are able but will with temptation make issue that you may be able to bear it." (1 Cor. 10 : 13) Through adequate contrition and confession the sinner's soul is washed in Christ's Precious Blood. On the other hand the unrepentant sinner has insisted on rebelling in a grave matter against the order God has willed for His creation. His will thwarts God's will: if God's order for creation is to be restored the sinner's will must be thwarted in the same measure as he has contravened the order established by God. That contravening of the sinner's will is punishment. It must follow sin as a shadow. It is sin's counterpoise; intrinsic necessity demands it to restore the balance of righteousness. Just retribution is simply the maintenance of order. It is also the vindication of the glory of the God who has been wronged by sin, and a manifestation of His holiness.

Do you maintain that sin hurts God and that He has. so to speak, to "get His own back"?

No; God cannot be hurt. He can be offended and deprived of the honour due to Him. God has only one motive in punishing and that is His own infinite holiness.

Are there devils in hell with pitchforks and other nasty instruments of cruelty?

There are certainly devils in hell, but the use of such instruments is the result of letting the imagination run riot. Nevertheless, the devils can afflict the damned. Their very nearness is one of the horrors of hell. They, being fallen angels, are mightier than the damned humans. The latter by yielding to the devils' temptations have chosen them as masters in place of God for ever. They are doomed to everlasting submission to the masters they have chosen.

Are there time and change in hell?

No. "Time shall be no longer" (Apoc. 10:6). The damned, like the saved, have come to their final state of changelessness.

May we pray that the damned will suffer a mitigation of their torment?

No. St Thomas Aquinas wrote: "The damned in hell are outside the bond of charity, by which the works of the living

extend to the dead; they have actually come to the terminus of their life, receiving the ultimate requital for what they deserve, even as the saints, who are in their final home."

It seems that in creating hell and damning souls God has done what is eternally useless. Do you not agree that according to the R.C. Church He is keeping in being an eternal evil and admitting His own failure?

No. Hell is not useless. Many people have been deterred from sin because God has told us about it. The saints in heaven must rejoice because they have been saved from hell. It is surely not evil that everyone should be rewarded according to his works. It is surely not evil that men should have free will and decide their own eternal destiny. Hell is not evil in itself. God remains infinite though some men reject Him. Hell is the logical outcome of God's plan. If His plan were frustrated and thwarted, if He had been forced to change it, He would have failed. We must believe that His plan is the best for the purpose He had in view. God would be defeated if souls could go to heaven even though they did not love Him perfectly, if He were forced after a time to release them from hell. Those damned in hell glorify God in His justice which simply withholds His favour from those who refuse to acknowledge it.

Is hell a mystery?

Yes. It is concerned with infinite realities and a finite mind cannot comprehend the infinite. But please do not think of hell and damnation without thinking of all that God has done to save the souls of men whom He has created. "Greater love than this no man hath, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15 : 13).